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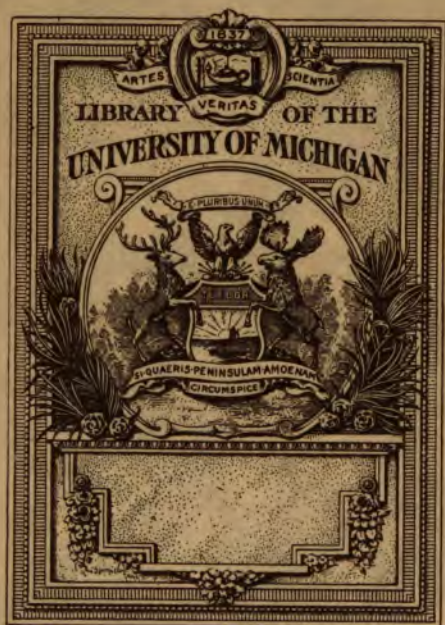
The GROTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

A Paper Read Before the Groton
Historical Society in 1898



By
MARY T. SHUMWAY

REVISED 1908



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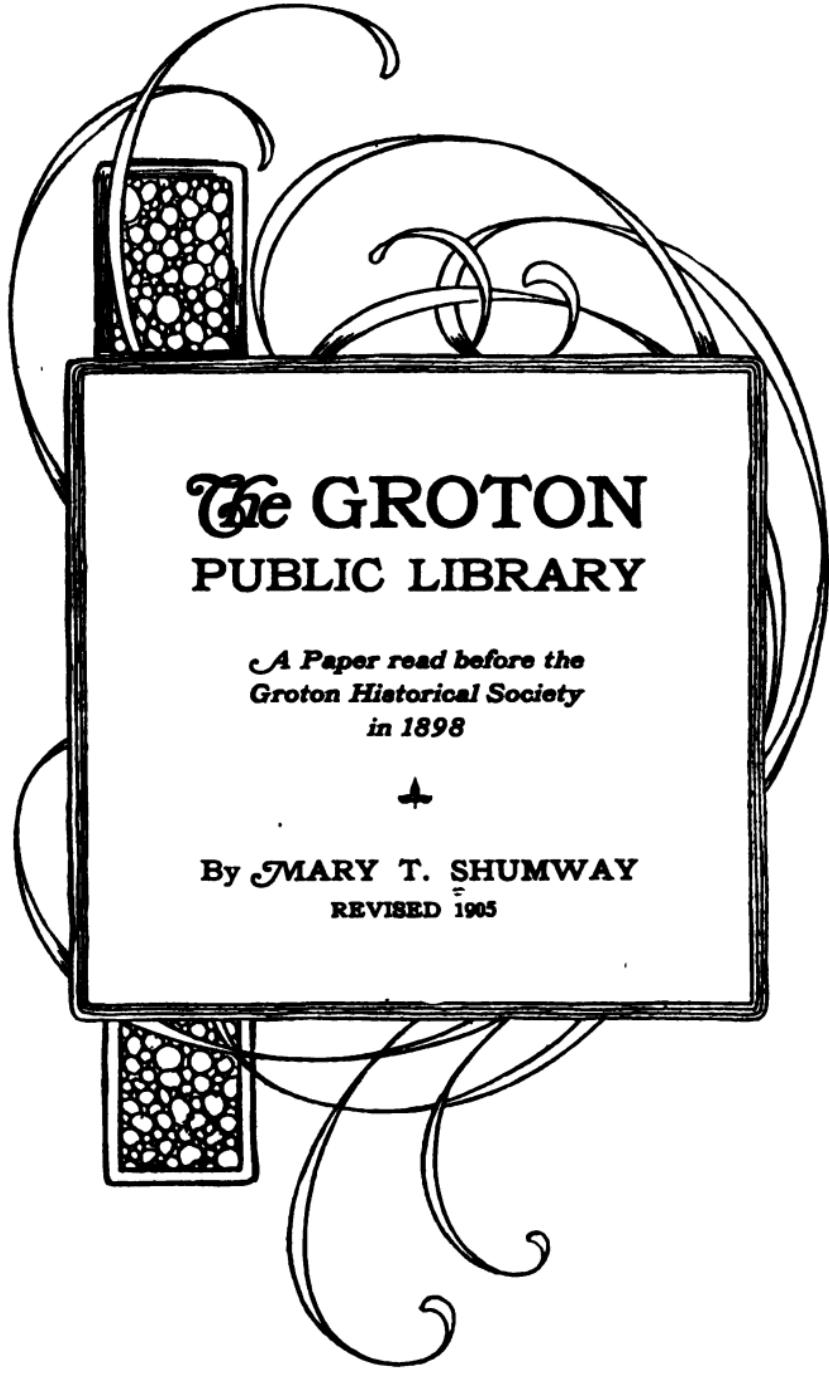
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**The GROTON
PUBLIC LIBRARY**

*A Paper read before the
Groton Historical Society
in 1898*



By **MARY T. SHUMWAY**
REVISED 1905



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AS early as the year 1834 Mr. Caleb Butler kept in his office, which was in the wing of Mr. Gerrish's store, several shelves of well selected books, the reading of which was accessible to any suitably recommended person on the payment of the small sum of two or three cents a week, but it was not till twenty years later, in the year 1854, the year in which Boston established her free Public Library, that the free Public Library of Groton also came into existence. It was through the generous thought and act of a Boston man who had been a Groton boy, the Hon. Abbott Lawrence, that this was accomplished.

At this time there were less than twenty towns in Massachusetts that possessed free libraries. Mr. Lawrence offered to the town the sum of \$500 on condition that the town raise a similar sum wherewith to establish and maintain a public

library. This the town unanimously voted to do. Accepting the condition they voted the corresponding \$500. They chose George S. Boutwell, George F. Farley, Joshua Green, David Fosdick, and John Boynton a committee with authority to expend the money appropriated, and to procure a suitable room for the accommodation of the Library. This was found in a central and convenient location at the corner of Main and Station streets, where Mrs. Margaret Blake kept for sale a small stock of pins and needles, paper and pencils. The Library was entrusted to her care. She presided over its first five years at the salary of \$50 a year. There are a few who still remember the kindly old lady, cheery and accommodating, and personally interested in every applicant for a book.

The modest first catalogue of the Library was issued in 1855, showing a good collection of between seven hundred and eight hundred volumes. Few of the titles indicate anything but substantial, solid reading, "The Lamplighter," "The Wide, Wide World," "Queechy," and Sir Walter Scott's being almost the only numbers that could come under the head of novels.

In 1860 the Library was removed to the Town House, and was kept in a small room at the right

of the front door, in charge of Henry Woodcock, who at the same place repaired clocks and jewelry.

The Library grew slowly, fed sometimes by the dog tax, but during the period of the Civil War the stern necessities of the existing conditions absorbed the spare money of the town and appropriation for the Library had small attention; apparently for some years it had none at all. In April, 1867, it was removed to a room in the Liberty Hall building, where Charles Woolley became its custodian. About this time there arose a demand for more works of fiction, and the gentleman who was at that time chairman of the trustees was appealed to to furnish more books of that nature. He replied that if he had his way there would be no fiction at all in the Library. The young people became urgent. They resolved to take action. They determined to call a town meeting to see if the Library committee might not be instructed by the public voice to allow more fiction to be purchased. They circulated a paper to that effect, and obtained 160 names in signature, when Mr. Woolley concluded to start a circulating library on his own account, and made purchase of a number of volumes of fiction, to which he added year by year, and thus formed a library independent of the Public Library, and which was patron-

ized by those who were willing to pay the sum of six cents weekly. The greater part of this collection was afterward sold to the town of Westford, which was about establishing a library, while duplicates and some others became absorbed in our own.

Meantime the Farmers' Club had started a small library for the use of its members which was afterwards presented to the Public Library with the request accompanying that \$6 might be spent yearly from the general fund for books bearing upon agriculture. The trustees have always welcomed suggestions of such books from any who are interested in that department.

In 1876 the Library was again removed to the Town House, and was located in the large, well-lighted room in the rear of the Post Office and still known as the Old Library Room, and Miss Jennie H. Thayer was chosen librarian by a ballot of the trustees, and was for sixteen years the enthusiastic and faithful keeper of the books.

The Library was now (at the time of this second removal to the Town House) twenty-two years old, and had reached the number of nearly twenty-five hundred volumes with a circulation of over forty-five hundred a year. The location of the Library at so central a place greatly promoted the cir-

ulation, for at the close of the first year there it had reached the greatly increased circulation of over eight thousand, an increase of thirty-five hundred over that of the preceding year.

Year by year the influence of the Library grew, and more and more must we have become a reading people, as is evidenced by the fact that ten years later, in 1886, although the population of the town had varied but slightly, the yearly issue of books had increased to over twelve thousand.

Miss Thayer resigned her office as librarian in 1891, to accept a position in the Boston Public Library, and Miss Emma F. Blood was appointed her successor. She has retained the position to the present time, to the satisfaction of the trustees and the public.

Thus during its existence of fifty-one years the Library has been in charge of but five different librarians.

The list of trustees for the same length of time is not complete to 1874, as no record is found, though we are certain of the names of George S. Boutwell, George F. Farley, Joshua Green, Oliver Ayer, and Josiah K. Bennett.

Since 1874 the list gives the names in order of appointment of George S. Gates, Clarissa Butler, Henry Robbins, Mary T. Shumway, Anne T.

Graves, Thomas L. Motley, Charlotte A. L. Sibley, Charles H. Gerrish, Charles Woolley, George S. Boutwell, Endicott Peabody, Joshua Young, Louis B. Voorhees, Arthur P. Stone, John H. Manning, Henry K. Richards, Martha P. Lawrence, William A. Gardner, Ellen M. Needham, Pemberton H. Cressey.

In 1884 Mr. Willard Dalrymple, a resident of Charlestown but a native of Groton, died. He generously remembered the town of his birth with a bequest of \$2500, directing that the income should be applied to the purchase of books for the Public Library.

A year or two later Mr. Augustus Fletcher, who had been for a few years a resident of Groton, died in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. His will contained a bequest to the Library of Groton of \$1000. The will was unsigned, but to the honor of Mrs. Fletcher is due the fact that the bequest was nevertheless paid. Mr. Luther Blood, also a lifelong resident of the town, bequeathed to it \$1000 for the use of its Library.

Thus enriched in addition to the good sum allowed each year by the town, the Library had grown faster and was gradually outstripping the limits of the room that contained it, and it was beginning to be a serious question how the necessary

space could be increased, when Mrs. Charlotte A. L. Sibley, moved by a noble and philanthropic spirit, offered to present to the town a site for a new Library building with an additional sum of \$4000 towards its construction. This sum she from time to time increased until it reached an amount not less than \$12,000, which was approximately one half of the cost of the whole; and even to the time of her death her gifts were continuously and noiselessly dropping into the possession of the Library, making it constantly her happy debtor.

The beautiful new building was dedicated May 18th, 1893. Its architect, Mr. Arthur Rotch, was a grandson of the Hon. Abbott Lawrence, who forty years before laid the foundation of the Library in giving the first \$500 for the purchase of books. Mr. Rotch's service was also a free gift, for he would receive no money for his generous labor. The cost of the land, building, and furnishing was \$27,700, of which \$15,000 were appropriated by the town.

The exercises of the dedication service were impressive. They were presided over by Colonel Needham, whose graceful utterances on all occasions where he was called to preside will long be remembered. The sublime prayer of Dr. Young,

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with its fitting responses by the people, the fine address of the day by our honored townsman and foremost citizen, Governor Boutwell, and the added address by General Bancroft, a son of Groton who has gained distinction in various fields, all conspired to make the occasion one of great interest in the community. The building committee gave over the keys to the trustees, and the new Library became the possession of the town to have and to hold forever. Its door is near the street, to invite the public to come freely in. The windows of its reading room look out on a lovely landscape of meadow and mountain, and call the mind to restful communion with the wisdom of the wise.

The walls of the rooms are gathering portraits of eminent sons or citizens of the town, notably those of Dr. Samuel A. Green, gift of Mrs. Sibley; Hon. George S. Boutwell, gift of the citizens of the town and others who wished to be included; the Rev. Crawford Nightingale, gift of Mrs. Nightingale, the Rev. Joshua Young, D. D., and Gen. W. A. Bancroft. Photographs also of Mr. Dalrymple, and Mr. Fletcher, remind us of their generous gifts, while for many years the bust of Abbott Lawrence has overlooked the shelves for which he furnished the first

books. The handsome clock in the hall was the gift of Mr. Amory A. Lawrence.

Considering its age of fifty-one years, our Library can hardly be called a large one. We have not quite eleven thousand volumes, but the circulation is over thirteen thousand, the establishment of a distributing station at West Groton in 1899 helping to promote this result. Some libraries not so old as ours have a greater number of volumes. Merit, however, is not always to be reckoned by quantity. The character of the books in a public library is of more importance than great numbers, and if our growth is sound and wholesome, doing its part well in helping to promote the virtue, refinement, and intelligence of the community, it is perhaps rapid enough.

The criticism has sometimes been made concerning our Library, even in these later years, that it has not enough of fiction. The counter criticism has also been made that it has too much. Since the public owns its Library, it has a right to a voice in the character of its supply. It must be adapted to the needs of the public and must be acceptable and pleasing, for only so can it be led to educate.

Our Library is well supplied with solid literature, and books of reference in various departments;

with encyclopædias American and English; with dictionaries biographical, geographical, historical, classical, and biblical; with histories ancient and modern, local, national, and foreign; with travels by land and sea; with essays physical and metaphysical; with the researches of science in mind and throughout matter; with philosophies natural, mental, and moral. Nor is the religious department ignored, though controversial matter, if added, comes by gift rather than by purchase; and yet doubtless, more than all these is read the novel, and in the large circulation, that is no doubt the largest factor.

While it may be regretted that solid fact and historic certainty and scientific research are not more welcome to the general mind than fancy and fiction, it will yet be admitted that stories with representations of human life and experience make appeal to the heart and sympathies, and possess a personal and individual interest that few ordinary readers resist.

But even the novel has a wide range. There is the worthy and the unworthy, the good and the evil. "There are novels," to quote the words of the Hon. Henry S. Nourse, a member of the Free Public Library Commission of Massachusetts, "in which are set forth great historical

characters, descriptions of notable scenes and historical events, rare psychological analysis, discussions of social, political, and religious questions, descriptions of life in this city, in that country, and on the sea. Thus the novel may become an educational force in itself, and a point of departure to better things."

It becomes the duty of those to whom the care of the Library is entrusted to sift the wheat from the chaff, that which strengthens and educates from that which is unwholesome and worthless, endeavoring to make the Library a fountain of healthful and refining influences.

The reading room is open to all, and it is gratifying to see that its chairs are rarely without occupants, but it would be well if its brightness and warmth and mental food would attract more from the street, and from the homes that have no large supply of books.

It is well to let the newspapers keep us in touch with affairs of importance in our own and other countries, but there is a vast amount of material in newspapers without the reading of which our youth would be the better, allowing the time to be more wisely employed in storing the mind with the wealth at command upon the tables and shelves of the Library.

